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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000220

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SUBJECT: A/S BOUCHER MEETS, VIEWS SUCCESS OF USG PROGRAMS IN LEBAP
WELAYAT

Summary

1. (SBU) A/S Boucher found Turkmenabat (capital of Lebap province), broadly aglow in anticipation of new post-Niyazov openness and opportunities, and looking for the United States to help realize the latter, in his February 16 meetings with the governor, community-activist groups, American-Corner students and even a Pedagogical Institute audience in the presence of the Institute's unreconstructed rector. End Summary.

Border-Post Breakfast; Well-Disposed Governor

2. (U) Boucher finished his three-day Turkmenistan stay with a February 16 day-trip to Turkmenabat, the capital of Lebap Welayat (province). Lebap is the breadbasket of Turkmenistan's agricultural production, historically surpassing the other five provinces in both wheat and cotton yields; its 60-something Hakim (Governor) Tagaymyrat Mammedov's personal background is tied life-long to farming. First stop for the Boucher group was a breakfast briefing by the long-time resident U.S. advisor duo from the Nevada National Guard who for the past two years have overseen the checkpoint-installation projects on Turkmenistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan. Project manager Jon Morrow and engineer David Koller described the status of the USG-funded Imamnazar turnkey border post, confirming that the provincial government has been supportive and helpful as the project proceeded.

3. (U) Second stop was the meeting with Hakim Mammedov. Like his four fellow governors, Mammedov has only been in office since Niyazov's blanket purge of their predecessors in October 2006, for falsifying sowing statistics. His conversation with Boucher principally consisted of concrete answers to agricultural-sector questions: prospects for reform; adequacy of government support; resource needs; water availability; technology and insurance; farmers' options for growing and selling their crops under market as opposed to state-decreed conditions. Boucher also asked about local

Internet access and current relations with Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, in particular regarding cross-border electricity supplies and oil-sector developments on the right bank of the Amu Darya River.

¶4. (U) Boucher noted President Burdimammedov's stress both in his campaign speeches and in their meeting the previous day about seeking international expertise and exchanges in general. USAID Country Representative Moretz emphasized that the United States would like to expand assistance programs in the agricultural sector.

"We're looking for all we can get," replied the governor, adding that "many other international organizations" already are involved in technical assistance programs in the province. As is his wont, the hakim dwelt fondly on his time spent in California as a Cochran Fellow in 1995.

Community Partnership Enthusiasm

¶5. (U) Next was a visit to the premises of the "Dostluk" (friendship) community, a USAID Civil Society Support Initiative beneficiary. Sitting on the raised outdoor platform used for communal tea and meals, a cluster of traditional elders and their mullah explained how their group interacted with both the community and local authorities. During 2006, Dostluk implemented three projects aimed at promoting social partnerships and engaging the local government, council of elders, youth, social workers and ordinary residents of this and neighboring villages in various community activities. Among the latter were drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse prevention events. Another grant supported the renovation and furnishings for the site of the visit, which was used for hosting traditional community events, such as weddings, funerals, and sports or musical events.

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¶6. (U) Asserting that the sixteen streets from which their organization arose had 10,000 persons, the elders at times excitedly noted that their civic structure represented the revival of traditional social practices and means for influencing social mores, without recourse to coercive policing. That said, they were also eager to show that, just two days earlier, they had received from local police a formal certificate lauding their efforts' effectiveness against petty crime and other social pathologies.

Pedagogical Institute: New Steps over Some Old Obstacles

¶7. (SBU) The Pedagogical Institute stop began with a discussion in the rector's office. Asked about the extent of existing exchanges, the rector referred to the Institute along with five other institutions of higher learning as having been involved in EU/TACIS training programs "for a long time." (Note: The rector has reportedly obstructed the EU-TACIS program since mid-2006, and the EU is considering pulling their equipment from the school. End Note.) He also mentioned past cooperation with the Eurasia Foundation. Boucher cited Berdimammedov's repeated endorsement of sending many more students abroad. How would the latter be selected -- via exam? Essentially ducking the question, the rector said only that "the Education Ministry has its plan" and "we aren't going to re-discover America." Responding to another question, he said unhesitatingly that "all teachers and students have Internet access." Thirty Afghan students came to study every year, mostly ethnic-Turkmen but also Pushtuns and Uzbeks. Local students were admitted chiefly via interview on a quota system by province for three provinces - Lebap, Mary and Dashoguz. A majority of the Institute's students were female. All students were required to teach for two years after graduating. Pay and respect were good, he said, so teachers typically continued in the profession.

¶8. (U) Boucher proceeded to deliver prepared comments on the theme of education to 60-70 assembled faculty and teacher-trainees. (Comment: The rector had originally insisted that only 20 teachers and some students could attend; APAO and visiting desk officer for ninety minutes had pressed for more, with the rector resisting on

various pretexts until the end. Moreover, despite post's desire for media coverage of the event, the MFA barred both state and international media from attending. End Comment.) At his comments' conclusion, the audience offered a dozen questions in a correct, rather scripted style. There was repeated reference to the new president's decree publicized just that morning, extending secondary and undergraduate education by a year. All professed enthusiasm. The rector proudly said that the faculty and student body had voted even more overwhelmingly (96%) for Berdimuhammedov than the nation at large, precisely because they so approved his campaign promises on education.

Utterly Upbeat: Exchange Students, Civil Society Support

¶9. (U) From the Pedagogical Institute, the Boucher party proceeded to the American Corner. The latter was packed with FLEX and other exchange alumni and also with numerous regular users of the Center's shelves and screens. A sixteen year-old girl was gravely overseeing the sign-in procedure for walk-in Internet users. Boucher addressed informal comments to the crammed-in audience, then took questions. The latter came fast and thick, and often were naive (e.g., would the U.S. government lend funds to finance educational applications and stays in the U.S.; when would it establish an American University of Turkmenistan), but all projected pent-up anticipation of the chance to travel and study abroad. Discussion with the FLEX and other exchange veterans carried over into a shared lunch at a nearby restaurant.

¶10. (U) The group's last drop-by stop was at the offices of Counterpart's Civil Society Support Center. Opened in 2001, the Center remains one of the only places in town where civil-society actors can come together to discuss issues of concern, receive

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training to improve their qualifications, and obtain access to legal information and the Internet. There was just time for a quick tour of the Internet Resource Center and encouraging comments by Boucher to an assembled group of civil-society leaders, including the head of the local handicapped organization, who were attending an introductory presentation on USAID/Counterpart's recently launched Community Empowerment Project. The project will continue and expand Counterpart's community development work by supporting civic groups' engagement with local governments to promote better governance and local economic development.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Turkmenabat has been the site of some of the worst local-government obstruction and menaces vis-a-vis U.S. projects and their implementers, including last October's notorious Halloween episode. Local and MFA official culprits for these past unpleasantnesses are still on the scene -- two of them accompanied the Boucher group in their standard role as required escorts. And while Boucher's presentation at the Pedagogical Institute was admittedly a welcome first, the rector's non-stop hindrance was cut from an all-too-familiar pattern.

¶12. (SBU) Low-grade harassment likely will continue in the short and even medium term. But unarguably there is a fresh atmosphere and ground for hope. The new, Cochran-veteran Hakim could hardly have presented himself as more favorably disposed to our approaches. Probably most encouraging of all was the sense of anticipation of a better future and appreciation for U.S. engagement in Turkmenistan. End Comment.

BRUSH